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ABSTRACT

School administrative decisions must be based on a broad range of input; the power of group thinking is required to ensure that the best decisions are made. The necessary transition from the old, closed autocratic administrative decisionmaking system to a new, open democratic organization requires not a radical leap, but a gradual transition. The South Huntington School District, a suburban school system on Long Island (New York) serving 5,500 students, initiated a Quality Circle program 7 years ago. Employees were given training in problem-solving techniques to allow them limited decisionmaking authority in their work situations under the guidance of management personnel. The noninstructional staff was enthusiastic and quick to participate in the initial training, but the teachers and administrators--already familiar with committee work and public presentations--tended to want to short-cut the systematic approach. The design of the quality circle program is restrictive; however, the program provides a core of individuals trained in problem solving who are ready to be participants in building-level and systemwide decisionmaking. The South Huntington School District is now poised to undergo a successful school-based management transition. (KM)

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SOUTH HUNTINGTON'S EVOLUTION TO SHARED DECISION MAKING

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The public schools belong to the communities which they serve. School administrators often forget this fact as they attempt to impose their ideology on reluctant constituents. The results are frequently disastrous, leading to community opposition to what is being proposed and, eventually, to the ouster of the responsible administrator.

A more successful strategy involves all segments of the school community in a planning process that leads to the establishment of goals that reflect a consensus of the general direction that the community wishes to follow. Within this framework, there are plenty of opportunities for administrators to fulfill their roles as educational leaders by becoming part of the goal setting process and helping to determine the direction that their schools will take.

Once goals have been established, broad based involvement is also desirable in determining the strategies that will be in effect to achieve the goals. This calls for large scale participation in problem solving and decision making by the people who will be called upon by administration to implement the plans.

Once upon a time, school administration thrived on autocracy. Students and parents never questioned the authority of the teacher, and teachers never

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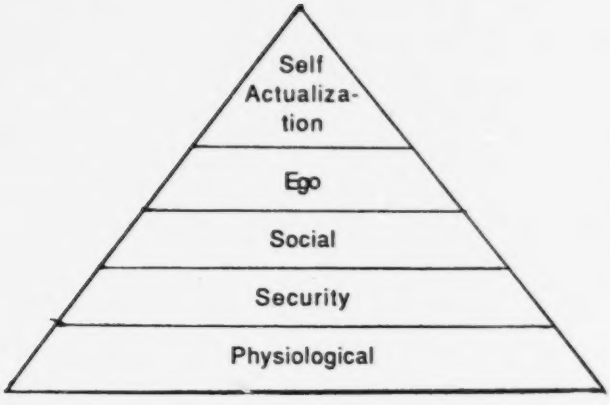
questioned the authority of the principal. Everyone was happy to do as they were told and there was autonomy behind the classroom door. Then along came the Watergate years and the growth of cynicism. Authority figures could no longer be taken at their word and commands had to be issued with full explanations.

Today, public education functions in a climate of distrust marked by a lack of confidence. National reports point to the failings of our educational system and cite statistics as evidence of how our youth lag behind the achievement of students throughout the rest of the world.

In this accusatory environment, permeated with distrust, the administrator who persists in making unilateral decisions should have his or her head examined. Decisions should be shared and based on a broad range of input. The power of group thinking is required to ensure that the best decisions are made.

The transition from a closed, autocratic type system, to an open, democratic organization requires a developmental process analogous to Abraham Maslow's theory on personality development and motivation. In articles published in the early 1940's, Maslow writes: "It is quite true that man lives by bread alone - where there is no bread. But what happens to our desires when there is plenty of bread and when our belly is chronically filled? At once, other and 'higher' needs emerge and these, rather than physiological hunger, dominate us. And when these in turn are satisfied, again new and still 'higher' needs emerge, and so on."



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

According to Maslow, individuals are motivated by an ever-changing assortment of factors organized in terms of those motivators that initially fulfill basic needs and progress in complexity to factors that affect higher level needs such as self-actualization.

In Maslow's scheme, an individual whose basic needs for food and shelter have not been met will not be motivated by the opportunity to self-actualize. Conversely, the individual who has a full stomach and feels secure will hardly be motivated by a basket of bread.

Applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs to organizations would suggest that shared decision making, as a motivational tactic, would place high up on the hierarchy. It would seem to fulfill the need to self-actualize. Consequently, shared decision making will thrive in organizations where the employee groups have had such basic needs as salary, security and working conditions met, contracts

are in place, and the employees are fairly satisfied. There exists a good relationship between labor and management and both groups are secure in their roles.

With this type of relationship in the background, a school district is ready to move into the area of shared decision making. However, as with Maslow's hierarchy, the move is not a jump from the lowest level to the highest level. It is a gradual transition upwards.

The South Huntington School District is a suburban school system on Long Island in New York State. The district serves 5,500 students in seven buildings including one high school, one middle school and an early childhood center. The district has always enjoyed the reputation of being a "good" school district and has frequently been in the forefront of innovation.

Seven years ago South Huntington initiated a "Quality Circle" program. Quality Circles were imported from Japan and implemented by many of the Fortune 500 corporations as the way to bring **quality** back into American products. Through Quality Circles, management placed decision making in the hands of employees but limited it to problem solving. Employees in job-alike situations formed a Quality Circle, were trained in problem solving techniques, identified a problem indigenous to their work situation and proposed a solution to management.

This technique proved very effective for many corporations, as employee groups often came up with cost-effective solutions to problems plaguing management. The Quality Circle groups often obtained positive reinforcement by way of

rewards for their cost-effective solutions and, a la Maslow, self-actualization through having played a role in an area that had previously been the sole province of management.

The South Huntington staff slowly embraced the Quality Circle process. The non-instructional staff was much more enthusiastic and was quick to participate in the initial training. Soon teams of secretaries, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, mechanics and custodians were identifying problems in their areas and recommending solutions. The use of systematic problem solving techniques by employee groups not previously allowed to have a voice in the process was quite impressive. The sight of a transportation worker or custodian in a business suit flipping through flow charts and pointing to overhead projections of data used to substantiate the group's identified problem was in itself an impressive event.

Teachers and administrators, on the other hand, were more familiar with committee work and public presentations. They therefore had a tendency to want to short-cut the systematic approach and fly by the proverbial seat of their pants. Consequently, they required more training in adhering to the principals of cause-effect relationships, problem identification and cost-effectiveness.

The Quality Circle program proved to be a significant precursor to shared decision making. Groups of employees had the opportunity to experience the process first-hand. However, the Quality Circle approach was, by virtue of its design, restrictive. The job-alike aspect of the groups limited the scope of the

problems and restricted involvement in topics that cut across different jobs throughout the system.

The move from Quality Circles towards school-based management is a natural progression and part of an organizational maturation process. School-based management is the name currently given to a process that calls for wide-scale involvement in problem solving and decision making. The Quality Circle program provided a core of individuals trained in problem solving and ready to be participants in a process that would allow for a greater degree of involvement in building level and systemwide decision making. School-based management allows for broad based involvement cutting through various levels of responsibilities.

First, however, there will be a need for broad-based training of the entire staff. Those actively involved in school-based management will receive training in group dynamics and problem solving similar to what was done under Quality Circles. Everyone will participate in workshops that will at least expose them to part of the process and inform them as to what it going on. The final phase will include training in a strategic planning model that will become the coordinating and management tool for the entire process.

South Huntington has traditionally enjoyed a positive labor/management relationship with its labor groups. Salary and working conditions are favorable and staff morale is high. In terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the staff is ready for the higher level motivational practices. Coupled with the Quality Circle training,

the district is poised to undergo a successful school-based management experience. The transition has been endorsed by the Board of Education and the Superintendent and has been adopted as one of the goals to be achieved by the district.

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